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U.S. Dodged Early Qaddafi Showdowns

In past reports, we have charged that Muammar Qaddafi could not have gained power in Libya without the sufferance of the Nixon administration. Here's more of the hidden history:

Richard Nixon and his foreign policy whiz, Henry A. Kissinger, stood by while Qaddafi, as boss of a tiny gang of young conspirators, seized power in Libya in 1969. The Nixon team also showed no particular concern when the usurper displayed all the symptoms of deep hostility toward the United States.

Qaddafi was clearly determined to shift the balance of power in the Arab world away from conservative, pro-western, commerce-as-usual quiescence to radical, anti-western, commerce-be-damned agitation.

As a determined revolutionary and religious zealot driven simultaneously by idealism and hatred, Qaddafi was obliged to take steps that were dramatic, shocking and punitive. He outlawed the teaching of English in the schools, harassed American Peace Corps volunteers out of Libya, turned Christian churches and Jewish synagogues into mosques and decreed that all businesses must be owned by "Arab Libyans."

Then he began a campaign to expel Americans from their great air base at Wheelus. This was the home of thousands of U.S. airmen, training center for North Atlantic Treaty Organization bombing forces and bastion of western security in the Mediterranean.

Qaddafi was considered so vulnerable at first, according to a Defense Department assessment, that an invasion by two Marine divisions was

deemed more than enough to topple his revolution and secure the oil fields against sabotage. The Central Intelligence Agency contended that the Marines wouldn't even be necessary, that it would be simple to engineer a coup and replace Qaddafi with a leader more friendly to the West.

Action against Qaddafi, whether overt or covert, could have been justified. We would have been acting not as an aggressor but as the defender of the lawful government, interceding at its request to oust a usurper.

Instead, Washington backed down every time Qaddafi staged an incident to test U.S. resolve. In a matter of months, the United States began evacuating all military personnel from Wheelus without even contesting the matter. As the Americans departed, Qaddafi triumphantly pledged "to put all my country's resources at the disposal of the confrontation states."

We have it from Kissinger that the U.S. government debated whether to accept or reject the Qaddafi coup and that Kissinger had analyses made of various actions that could be taken. What then, with the redoubtable Nixon at bat, was the rationale behind the benign policy toward Qaddafi?

The official State Department explanation, given to a Senate inquiry, was that there was a local intelligence failure. Here's what the Senate reported: "The U.S. Embassy in Tripoli had not anticipated the Libya coup. The young military officers [who plotted the coup] were not known to U.S. government officials. The U.S. government therefore did not anticipate the radical changes which were to follow"